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ABSTRACT

This paper describes one accreditation team leader's experience with coordinating the entire team accreditation review process on personal computer and offers 14 suggestions for future implementation. The leaders of the accreditation team describes pre-accreditation visit arrangements to facilitate the use of computers. He polled team members on their use of personal computers (PCs), whether they were International Business Machine (IBM) compatible or Macintosh compatible machines. They were also polled on their use of word processing software. Appropriate disks were then sent to each containing the pertinent accreditation standards and other information. Some problems with disk and program compatibility arose as team members each had unique combinations of hardware and different version of software. Before the campus visit, the leader met with the university's computer expert to review the machines that would be available. After some initial concerns, all members conducted their two days of interviews and research and recorded their evaluations with the help of their computers. At the visit's end, each participant turned in a written report on disk which later was merged, edited and mailed to the state Department of Education in both hard copy and disk form. (JB)

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ELECTRONIC HELP FOR THE HARRIED TEAM CHAIR

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If you were to ask anyone how a particular procedure was developed, many would probably tell you that the procedure had been in place for years. Changing the way people do things is often difficult and in many cases requires a great deal of planning and perseverance. For those of you who have served on accrediting teams, you may remember that the team chair usually gives the team an orientation, that there is a set of standards that are reviewed, and that everyone on the team takes notes, and later writes a report to be given to the chair. There are a number of team meetings in which these things are discussed, but ultimately everything is written down. With the availability of personal computers, (PCs), one would expect that the procedures used over the years would have changed by now and that computers would have replaced the yellow pad and pencil. Clearly, this is not the case.

I find it surprising that we are still hand writing such reports when, in fact, as professionals we are expected to be reasonably fluent in the use of computers and should have no difficulty using word processors. For the past few years, whenever I have been asked to chair a team to review educational programs or to serve on such a team, I have either requested a PC on site or have traveled with a laptop. Recently I was asked to chair a team for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and I decided that we would utilize the available technology. That is, rather than have team members write their reports on yellow pads to be typed at some later date, it seemed more reasonable to have multiple computers at their disposal. I thought that it would be ideal if each team member were given his or her own laptop. I was also interested in whether this change could take place smoothly and be accepted by the team members, as well as the institution being evaluated and the accrediting agency.

To implement this idea, I asked the dean if he would arrange to have several computers at the team's disposal during the two-day visit. I indicated that we would need both MACs and IBM compatible computers. The team was to consist of 17 people each of whom would review one or two programs. Once the dean agreed to try to accommodate my request, we contacted each member of the team to find out what computer and what type of software s/he used. It turned out that half of the people were familiar with MAC or Apple programs and seemed comfortable with WORD for MAC while the other half seemed to use WORD or Word Perfect for IBM compatible PC's, or at least, that is what I was told. Later on it became apparent that this simple dichotomy was actually more complex than I thought at the outset.

Since the initial information I had received was unambiguous, it appeared that it would be rather easy to identify what was needed and to have all of the standards typed on disk for each of the programs. After that was done I needed to send a disk to each team member with the standards in WORD, Word Perfect, or WORD for MAC. The disks were labeled and sent to the team members with a memo indicating that they should read the materials, take notes on the disk, review the standards, and keep records of how standards were met.

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It had not occurred to me that each team member might use a different version of WORD or Word Perfect. In fact there are at least three versions of each of the three programs. In addition to this, team members were using different generation MACs or IBM PCs. In fact, a team of 15 people used 15 unique combinations of computer types and word processing versions. Yet, even with all of these variables, it was possible to expect a report from each that was downloaded to a single PC or floppy disk, merged, and put into a draft report. It seemed to me that if the evaluation process was to be smoother that this objective needed to be achieved.

As one might expect, I received telephone calls from the team members, even though I explained in my letter what I expected people to do. Some members of the team claimed that they could not read the disk that I sent them, others indicated that they did not have the program they needed to utilize the disk I sent. Several people called to thank me for using computers, and some indicated that they would bring their own laptop. It was clear that the level of comfort among team members varied greatly, but that all were willing to try and most thought that this was a good idea.

After talking to the various team members about their problems, it occurred to me that I had better contact the Director of Computing at the campus where the review was to be based . About a week before the visit I was able to reach the computer person at the University and inquired about the type of computers we would have at our disposal. He indicated that we would have six computers including 286 IBM compatibles and three generations of MACs, including one of the latest models. Clearly, I was becoming concerned about the compatibility of word processors, computers and the disks that I prepared for each individual. Yet, the Director of Computers assured me that there would be no problem. Of course, he was going to a conference that week and would be unavailable for consultation.

Upon arrival, I tried my master disk on one of the IBM compatible computers to find that it was unable to read the disk . Then I realized that I needed to save the files by using an earlier version of WORD, after which it worked. However, this little setback did give me cause to be concerned. What if the process did not work and we had to do everything on yellow pads? I found out on first encounter with the campus computers that dropping from a version of my word processor, which was WORD 6.0, to WORD 2.0 caused a few minor problems. That is, a number of the word processing features were lost.

At our first team meeting we reviewed the standards and the task at hand. I answered most of the concerns that people had and then a number of questions about the use of computers were raised. I realized that a number of people were feeling a little nervous about whether they could really do what I asked. I tried to reassure people and they seemed to calm down. At the same time, I understood that they needed to succeed immediately or they might become anxious about the task. Therefore, I asked team members to start working on the computers to see if they could use the disk I had sent them. We were fortunate to have one team member who was knowledgeable regarding the use of MACs and he helped those who were using the MAC Machines, while I worked with some of the others. There were three people who brought their own "notebooks" and they were rather self sufficient.

During our-two day visit team members interviewed faculty, students, staff and others. They raised questions, took notes, and verified the institutional report. After dinner on the night before we were to leave, the team met to review findings, after which each team member typed his or her final report. On the morning of the final day all but one member of the team turned in a draft of his/her report on a disk. Now, all I had to do was download each report to my hard disk and read the draft. After completing the exit and the trip home, I merged the files into a coherent report, edited the final copy, and mailed both a hard copy and a disk to the Pennsylvania Department of Education The commonwealth seemed pleased with the process and the final report, as did every member of the team.

If I were to do this again, there are a number of things that I would incorporate into the procedure. I will summarize these here:

- Several months prior to the team visit, meet with the appropriate Dean and the Director of computers to determine the number and type of computers and printers that will be made available to your team.
- If possible, have members of a team working in both the IBM and MAC environments at the same time and still have the final report on a single computer that can be merged into a single document by your word processor. However, it takes more than a cursory knowledge of computers to see that this happens.
- As soon as the team list is available, call and/or write to each team member and explain how you plan to organize the visit, how computers will be utilized, and determine what kind of hardware and software that person is able to use.
- Further suggest to that team member that he or she might bring a laptop if one is available. The ideal would be for each team member to bring his or her own laptop, or to have laptops provided for this purpose.
- Have the standards typed onto disks that are formatted to be used by the least sophisticated computers used at the time. This increases your flexibility.
- Save the material on disk to run on the kind of computer the person will use at his or her home institution.
- Mail a disk to each team member and then call or write to see that the disk can be read.
- Call the Director of Computing a few weeks before arrival and let that person know what kind of computers your team members need. Two people can share one computer for this purpose.
- Arrive a little early the first day and check the computers yourself.
- On the first day or evening when the team arrives and has its meeting, try to pair people so that a person who is a bit nervous can work with someone who is knowledgeable.
- Designate one or two team members who are rather comfortable with computers as resources for the rest of the team.
- Very early in the process, see that everyone starts writing on a computer and try to work with several team members who you sense need help and support.
- Have each team member print out at least one page of his or her report so you can read it and see how well people are doing.
- If a team member has a great deal of difficulty, have another person on the team help that person to succeed.

Following these steps enables one to avoid a few of the pitfalls of the electronic chair and bring the review process into the 21st century.